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Op-Ed: Can Sanctions Be More Effective Than Military Action In Iran?

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The United States and its allies are currently seeking to use international sanctions to prevent Iran from developing the technology leading to a nuclear weapons capability. It remains uncertain if the sanctions will be effective, and the U.S. leadership has correspondingly announced that all options—including military options—are on the table. The question that has emerged from this dilemma is should the United States and its allies continue forward with sanctions or should we plan to engage in near term military action (possibly in coordination with the Israelis) if we expect to defeat the Iranian nuclear weapons program?

Sanctions in general are often a blunt and ineffective tool for cracking a regime. Sometimes they are only employed to check the “we tried everything else” block to satisfy the international community before unleashing military action. Yet in Iran, sanctions seem to display a great deal more potential than is usually the case. The European Union oil embargo and U.S. and other banking sanctions have demonstrated a powerful impact on the Iranian economy, which has already been substantially weakened by Iranian government mismanagement. Over the last year, the Iranian rial has lost around 80 percent of its value when measured against the U.S. dollar. Businesses all over the country are failing, and those that need foreign currency to purchase imported items or technology (such as auto or machine parts) are in deep trouble. Unemployment is currently at least 20 percent and could go much higher. The economy is not collapsing, but it is contracting, and it may continue to do so at a very rapid rate. If sanctions are strongly and continuously enforced and perhaps expanded, there is no reason for this trend to be reversed.

Sanctions, even if they are supplemented by covert action, nevertheless, seldom achieve rapid results, and it is not clear how much time they will need if they are to succeed in this case. In the past, critics of sanctions have often stated that Iran simply absorbed the pain and inconvenience created by these measures and continued working on a nuclear weapon. In this view of events, time is on the side of the Iranians because they move closer to a nuclear capability, while accepting sanctions as the cost of doing business. This calculus may now have changed, at least to some extent. If the Iranians continue to develop nuclear weapons while their economy is contracting and discontent is growing, it is more difficult to say that time is on their side. The economic pain is no longer quite so manageable, and continued efforts to obtain nuclear weapons may undermine a variety of other key national goals. U.S. and allied leaders have demanded that the Iranians make this choice by stating that their governments are willing to support rapid sanctions relief as soon as Iran gives up its nuclear weapons option in a verifiable way. Put more bluntly, this approach basically translates to, "surrender at your leisure, until then the strangulation of the Iranian economy is on you."

The alternative to sanctions is a U.S. war with Iran that will probably center on a bombing campaign of at least a month to attack a variety of targets associated with the nuclear program in dispersed and in many cases hardened sites. A bombing campaign is clearly more dramatic than sanctions, but will it accomplish more in this instance? It is doubtful that most Iranian nuclear weapons technology will be eradicated in such strikes due to factors such as dispersal, protection, secrecy, and redundancy. The Iranian nuclear weapons program will correspondingly be set back by an air campaign, but it will not be eliminated. Only a ground campaign could do this, and that approach is not being openly discussed. If the United States did deploy significant numbers of U.S. ground forces into Iran, they could easily defeat Iranian conventional forces which are generations behind U.S. forces, but other problems would exist. Such a campaign would be a massive undertaking that would almost certainly require a protracted stabilization and counterinsurgency campaign for years afterwards. By contrast, the air war alone option would not only fail to eliminate the Iranian nuclear weapons program, but it could also unite the population behind the Tehran government due to the experience of being bombed. An air war alone strategy may, therefore, help the Iranian leadership, while any war could potentially undermine the stability of some U.S. Arab allies with large Shi'ite Muslim populations (Iraq, Kuwait, and Bahrain come to mind) where sectarian sympathy for Iran often runs deep.

Additionally, not all allies will understand a U.S. decision to abandon promising sanctions to engage in an air campaign. Putting aside the military problems that could occur, European nations could lose a great deal of enthusiasm for any post-war sanctions that the United States may wish to keep in place to prevent Iran from rebuilding its nuclear infrastructure. The sanctions regime could also lose regional support under such circumstances, and this would be a serious loss. Iran has seldom been popular with Sunni Arab countries and is even less so now due to its support of the Assad regime in Syria. All Arab states (except Iraq) are angry with Tehran for supporting the Syrians, and Qatar even accuses Assad of waging a “war of extermination” against his own people. In general, these governments have been so antagonized by Iranian support for Assad that they are in no mood to oppose the imposition of sanctions on Iran. A war, however, is a much more serious matter, and at that point, future Arab support for anti-Iranian action becomes more questionable.

Finally, there is one particularly relevant dimension of the sanctions debate to consider. One of the main reasons that Iran's last shah was overthrown involved the anger of the urban poor who rose against the regime. The government of the Islamic Republic has never lost sight of this fact and throughout its existence has attempted to keep the poor quiescent initially with subsidies on staples and more recently with direct cash assistance. The poor will not starve under the current sanctions since the prices of staple foods are artificially held low by the government, but they will have lots of reasons to be unhappy with rising unemployment, a potential inability to obtain more than the most basic foods, and progressively deteriorating economic conditions. Other Iranians will also be hit by these problems, and members of all income levels may at some point seek political leaders that promise them a way out. Iranian politicians know the price that the shah paid for ignoring the needs of ordinary Iranians and may not wish to gamble their future on a nuclear capability that will never shield them from their own population.

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